

THE QUESTION OF PEOPLE CENTRIC CONSERVATION - RETAINING CITY HISTORIES

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Retaining histories of places is an exercise oriented toward politics of identity representation. Social equality, inclusivity, community representation and representation at various scales and levels like regionalist, nationalist and global identities are important debates that constitute the notion of representation of a nation or a people, of which historic preservation is a constituent. UNESCO Convention of Intangible Heritage 2003 recognizes the need to conserve and support various cultural heritage practices that are key ingredients of indigenous culture, with soulful meanings attached, of which the tangible is a mere representation. Often, argued a paper presenter from US, Architect Jon Calame, the exercise of conservation over simplifies the complexity of society, that associates values and gradation to the tangible and intangibility of heritage.

The International Conference on Urban and Regional Planning at the Architecture and Planning Department, NED University 2020 was themed around the question of **Retaining City Histories – An Integrated Approach to Planning**. Held on 18th -19th December as a webinar, the conference included three technical sessions along with an introductory session and in all covered about 11 research papers that explored the different aspects of history of cities, documented, challenged, confronted and preserved, questioning multiple interpretations of history and deliberating on its multi-disciplinary nature of integration.

This was the Fourth International Conference in its series and has been a continuing tradition for more than a decade at the DAP- NED University, initially as Seminar in Planning. The introductory session on Friday, 18th December included a keynote speech by Prof. Sajida Vandal, followed by chief guest address by Mr. Syed Abul Fazal Rizvi, presiding remarks by Vice Chancellor NED University, Prof. Dr. Sarosh Hashmat Lodi and address by architect and academic Jon Calame from Global Institute of Sustainable Property, USA.

The three technical sessions of the conference held on the second day, were thematically grouped. The first technical session focused on historicity or historic values and revitalization premises for old city areas, presenting cases from Iranian cities, Hyderabad and Lahore walled city. The second technical session interestingly focused on Sufi heritage and architecture, its mapping, preservation, commemoration value in the current social milieu and evolution. Looking at cases from Lahore - Misri Shah, Bhitshah – Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, and Tekkes in Albania, the papers mapped the evolution of this heritage, deliberating on questions of historic continuity and preservation recognizing their significance in narrating regional history. The third technical sessions looked at a bigger scale of relation of major water sources like the coast and river as important elements in history and in dictating relation to the social and economic environment as conflicting with the ‘development’ premises in the current neoliberal paradigm. The three papers in this focused on the water histories of the Indus River, the incongruence of new development and the plight of the old fishermen livelihoods attached at Gwadar coast, and the question of sustainable urban development in Hyderabad. The papers were all very good and were deliberated upon by two panelists in each technical session, highlighting general and specific issues in theory and practice.

When talking of historic preservation of cities, the most important question was put across effectively by Prof. Sajida Vandal on the issue of whose history ought to be preserved. Should it be the history formalized nationally, the history of any particular community, personal histories or the regional history? The purpose of selecting a particular version of history was questioned by Jon Calame alongside Arif Hasan at the panel discussion, hinting at the need for a representation of the different

sections of society and social groups through this. The concept of authenticity is tied to preserving historic value with the local people support, who are main players in this preservation, be it the community, the nation or individuals. Architect Jon Calame further also highlighted the need for the preservation of heritage that narrated an oppressive history of subjugation, colonization, saying that while such places may make people uncomfortable, they nevertheless are a chapter in the history of particular places and are a reminder of independence histories.

The notion of identities was also much talked about directly and indirectly. Preservation of history and historic values are reinforcements of cultural identities or part of the processes that construct identities of people and place. While identity is a complex notion, constructed of many socio-cultural 'isms' like globalism, nationalism, localism, regionalism, individualism, yet it is just as important to try to create frameworks of representation and overlapping intersections between them. These notions surface when talking about preservation of walled cities, or peoples heritage like landmarks that have played an important role within the socio-cultural milieu of a context as well as their interaction with new projects oriented to 'development'. The paper on Gwadar by Mishele Ijaz was vital in highlighting the interaction between local (fishing) community and national development.

The local community attaches meaning to a (historic) place traditionally through particular activities. Various papers including the ones on Lahore walled city, mapping indigenous fishing community in Gwadar, age-old Fakir community supporting Bhitai's heritage pointed toward the essential role played by the local community through its regular routine activities and rituals in attaching value and meaning to cultural heritage. The important question about the sustainability of their role in preservation, development of areas and their upgradation and conservation was a common one raised by these papers among others. While conservation is intended in general toward a common good for the people, and thus the involvement of community is idealistic, yet when processes of preservation and upgradation are put into action, sustainability remains a question. Well pointed out by panelist, Architect and Planner Arif Hasan that while the involvement of community in preservation is a slow process, we as architects are not equipped with dealing with this process that is a bottoms up approach that considers the needs and requirements of the local community playing an essential role in identity narrative, as a priority. The tussle and conflict between the 'authorized heritage discourse' and the 'unauthorized heritage discourse' is one that nevertheless needs to be recognized. The panel discussions did point toward the growing inflexibility of authorized institutions of heritage particularly in the west, where conservation oversimplifies social complexities and relations that are processes of meaning making. Several cases presented local meaningful associations with built heritage in the Pakistani context having survived and struggling for sustenance. These association provide a window for learning as case studies and solutions to issues in the 'modern' developing urban context. Also their own sustainability issues can be looked at as being development oriented. Thus, the panelists including Dr. Noman Ahmed and Pervaiz Vandal highlighted the need to explore opportunities of preservation that support development, that these may in tandem support one another with primary importance awarded to association with the local community. The local Karachiite cases of redevelopment and conservation attached with Empress Market and the Mazar of Abdullah Shah Ghazi are articulate this point well. The urban development in both cases, tied inevitably with the buildings themselves, has disregarded the association of local communities and citizens to the places through centuries, without recognizing the economic, social and cultural value of these relations, adding to social inequalities, poverty and the urban problems of the revamped context. the need to preserve people's associations to place, through supporting and preserving their age old activities, rituals associated to places like Mazars, temples and the surrounding urban contexts was stressed upon by architect and planner Arif Hasan. Dr. Noman Ahmed further added the significance of recognizing

the historic contributions to Pakistani cities, particularly Karachi, by Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Parsis and people belonging to other faiths besides Muslims. The example of Gurdwaras and the Sikh community recently receiving the limelight in preservation of their cultural heritage in Pakistan is a good case displaying inclusivity and making evident the key relation between politics and the building up of identity. Further supporting local community structures can be a great way of reinforcing ownership and belonging of a social group with the place, its history and can act as an important strategy in development of place.

Jon Calame brought out the downside of monument preservation focusing on the case of the Confederate Monuments in the American South, symbolic of the racial struggle during American civil war. Thousands of monuments throughout the region in his opinion continue to reinforce the racist attitudes and psychology of the inhabitants and thus he argued for the case of their removal for a more equitable society. Given this, while panelists argued that uncomfortable, conflicting reminders commemorate an important chapter of history, bringing out in comparison the memories of partition in the Indian subcontinent, the torturous history of concentration camps in Germany, Poland being crude reminders of a historic time. Yet, if the psychological harm brought to people was greater than the value of preservation as in the case of US, then argued Calame, there is a case of removing the Confederate Monuments that continue to enforce ideals of white supremacy among the African American population.

Of the three technical sessions, the first focused on the relation of history and identity to old economic centers. These old city areas display clear relation of economy to build space through mixed use of spaces, pointing to an urban design that was negotiated by the local people and represented through the integration of private and public spaces at multiple levels. The case of the walled city of Lahore and Hyderabad were presented by Zunaira Batool (NCA Lahore) and Fahmida Shaikh (NED Karachi), while the case of Iranian cities was presented by Sharieh Hosseini (COMSATS Lahore). The case of Iranian cities showed cases of urban conservation alongside, highlighting what was preserved and what was lost in the process. Essentially, the three cases pointed toward the successful relation of working spaces to living spaces in old city areas, with clear demarcation of public and private space separations at multiple levels, that create good gradation and use of spaces. These traditional and indigenous use of spaces point toward a clear relation between the social relations and their spatial associations. They also preserve the working environments of specialists, indigenous communities, that worked within these historic environments, identifying and belonging to them, alongside making their contribution to society and economy.

The second technical session focused on documentation of Sufi heritage in case studies on Misri Shah Mazar and precincts in Lahore, the Mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and its relation with the indigenous fakir community, the Tekkes or Sufi lodges/ khanqahs in Albania and their recent preservation strategies. These were presented by Saba Samee (ICA, Lahore), Masooma Shakir (NED Karachi) and Enea Serjani (Italy). The three papers presented a documentation of Sufi contexts, recreating in ways what had been environments for the budding of Sufism and connecting them to the present contextual developments, highlighting the inherent characteristics that define their historic values that are lost, or may be lost if remain unprotected. Sufi shrines, lodges and dargahs make up for an important part of the history of the region of Central Asia and their preservation and integration into the contemporary times makes for a subject that requires attention by preservationists, architects, academics and planners.

The third technical session aimed to highlight the relation of geography to historicity and people settled within a place. Papers presented include one on the flood avulsion of Indus Rivers,

documenting water histories by Durre Shahwar Khalil (KU Leuven, Belgium), one on Gwadar coast CPEC development and the indigenous population of fishermen by Mishele Ijaz (Urban Unit Lahore) and last on Sustainable Urbanization of Hyderabad by Hassam Waseem (MUET, Jamshoro). New developments bring about new energy and people to a place, however, there is an increasingly tendency of top down planning approaches to disconnect with existing context situations where people have been residing often for decades and centuries for reasons that connect them to the place in strong ways. The plight of the fishermen was such in Gwadar that while they want development to affect them and their lives positively and progressively, however the new developments in the context completely ignore their presence. As citizens of Pakistan they require better infrastructure support that assists them in harnessing better life conditions and upgradation of economic infrastructure as essentials among other services.

The conference all in all was packed with intellect, good papers and debates. Enthusiastic participation from an international audience including local and foreign universities, academics and students, was one of the good takes of the interactions. Despite the constraints of the pandemic situation, the webinar conference was well received and covered many essential points for contextual reference. The recordings of the event are available on the Conference's facebook page.